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INFO RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD IMMEDIATE 0783

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STATE FOR NEA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/04/2018

TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: SARG UNLIKELY TO "OFFICIALLY" RECEIVE FOREIGN  
FIGHTER DEMARCHE

REF: STATE 18213

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (c) Summary: The MFA is unlikely to "officially" receive reftel demarche on Foreign Fighters, although Charge presented its substance to the Vice Foreign Minister's chief of staff February 27. Until the SARG deals with the problem of how to distract attention from Lebanon(perhaps by using the Gaza situation) and gain a minimum showing of Arab Heads of State at the March 28 Damascus Arab League Summit, the SARG, in classic Syrian fashion, is making very few decisions and is unwilling to receive messages from the U.S. End summary.

12. (c) Charge met Hussam Alaa, chief of staff to Vice Foreign Minister Faisal Mikdad February 27 to relay substance of reftel demarche with the intention of laying the groundwork in order to obtain a meeting to present the demarche to the Vice Foreign Minister (who is the lead SARG Foreign Ministry official on Iraq issues). Foreign Minister Muallem and his office director were out of Syria delivering Arab League Summit invitations to Mauritania and Oman. Charge emphasized the importance the U.S. attached to Syria taking steps to reduce the flow of terrorists responsible for indiscriminate violence in Iraq. Alaa listened intently and said he would seek an appointment for the Charge with the Vice Foreign Minister to deliver the demarche although he noted the VFM was very busy "with Arab League summit preparations".

13. (c) In the Charge's subsequent phone calls with Alaa seeking news on the demarche, Alaa has become increasingly reticent on the subject of the demarche and stated specifically on March 3 that the current atmosphere "with the deployment of U.S. warships" made it very difficult for the SARG to "officially" receive the demarche. When the Charge emphasized the importance of this matter and noted that he had on several occasions passed information on foreign terrorists transiting to or from Iraq to the Chief of Protocol (the SARG's designated POC for the Charge) in the past and that it was very important that the SARG receive the demarche at some level, Alaa replied only that the Ministry was trying to decide how to receive the demarche.

14. (c) Comment: The combination of the extreme pressure from "brother" Arabs over the upcoming Arab League Summit (and particularly the Saudi-driven media campaign against Syria as host) and the February 28 announcement of the U.S. naval deployment has meant that decisions normally taken by the MFA are likely being passed to Bashar himself for action. The classic Syrian position in the face of a challenge is to sit tight and hope things change to Syria's advantage. Bashar, already on the spot over the Mughniyeh assassination, is likely focused on the prospect of a less than impressive

showing of Arab Heads of State at the end of this month in Damascus and looking for distractions from Lebanon, such as the Gaza situation. It is Charge's assessment that the SARG will not officially receive the demarche on Foreign Fighters now, although we will continue to press to deliver it. Until the SARG weathers the crisis (of its own making) of blindly pushing forward on its plans to host the Damascus summit while remaining inflexible on Lebanon, the SARG (and particularly the MFA which has the lead on the summit) may remain unwilling to receive U.S. messages.

CORBIN